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ABSTRACT

Participant/observation is useful as a tool for gathering evidence about processes, circumstances, or other observable conditions. A participant/observer is an investigator gathering evidence. Observations are carefully recorded, prejudgment is scorned, and judgments flow from the evidence. In approaching a situation to be investigated, the participant/observer should get a flavor of the system of which the situation is a part, identify those problems or parts of the system that influence the situation under investigation, and select the problems or parts that seem most important and might provide vital evidence. Once the situation is chosen, five types of data are often important: descriptive data about settings, accurate descriptions of actions and behaviors, word-for-word statements, traces and wear spots, and documents. The participant/observer is also interested in reliable witnesses and informants. Self-training exercises and sample observations are included. (Author/IRT)

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Collecting Evidence

A Layman's Guide to Participant Observation

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH EDUCATION & WELFARE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

by joseph ferreira & bill burges

Institute for Responsive Education

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OUTLINE

Introduction: Informed Participation and Citizen-Action-Research

A. The Purpose of Participant Observation (P/O)

B. A Three Step Strategy for Citizen Groups

C. P/O Data: What It Is and How To Get It

   1. Descriptive Data About Settings

   2. Accurate Descriptions of Actions and Behaviors

   3. Word for Word Statements

   4. Traces and Wear Spots

   5. Documents

D. A Special Case: Reliable Witnesses and Informants

E. Using the Data

F. Who Can Do P/O?

G. Self-Training Exercises

   1. Mini-observations

   2. Conversations

   3. Memory Tests

   4. Community Observations

   5. Mock Informant Interviews

   6. Your School

   7. Trace Effects and Wear Spots

   8. Group Study

H. Sample Observer's Report: Room 222 and Jim's Room
   by Stephanie Bromley

I. Checklist

P/O FOR WHAT?

RESOURCE DIRECTORY

INTRODUCTION

Informed Citizen Participation and Citizen-Action Research

"What? Another study? What we need is some action for a change."

We've all heard this many times. Doing a study often seems to be the surest way to avoid taking action. Politicians and government officials have long buried controversial issues in studies--studies that end up in yesterday's newspapers, written so that nobody will want to wade through them.

We should not stop studying things. Or fail to get the facts before we act. But in the area of local public schools, we should ask, "Who should study what? Toward what end? Why? And how can we combine research with action to solve the problems we uncover?"

We are convinced that some of the most useful research on community and education problems can be done by the people most affected, the local residents. The community that can define the issues, get the facts, determine what needs to be done, and act to realize its proposals is a community that will influence its schools and make them accountable. Professional educators or school board members who encourage citizens to become involved in fact-finding and making recommendations will discover new channels for community involvement and improved community relations.

It's no surprise that as public schools have increased their expenditures, they have also faced increasing demands for accountability from the clients they serve and the constituents who "pay the freight." But for many reasons school board members and school officials are less able or willing to be responsive to the people they serve or represent. Highly centralized districts, for example, mean more constituents for each representative. The average school board member now represents twenty times more people than s/he did in 1900. When people are demanding accountability, and officials are less able to respond, the result is often public suspicion, lack of support, and misunderstanding.

Citizen participation in education can help alleviate these problems by making parents, students, and community members equal partners in educational decision making. In this sense, citizen participation means informed involvement in which the people power of a community or an entire city is marshalled to solve the community's problems.

IRE

The Institute for Responsive Education (IRE) has been working on a number of projects to help public officials and community groups increase their

ability to work together toward common goals of better education.

This past year, IRE held hearings and communicated in other ways with educators and lay people across Massachusetts as part of a state-funded project called MASS/PACTS (Massachusetts Parents, Administrators, Community, Teachers, and Students). One major outcome of MASS/PACTS is a handbook and resource directory called TOGETHER: SCHOOLS AND COMMUNITIES, on the process of school/community cooperation. Written by IRE Associate Director Miriam Clasby, it is designed to stimulate and assist informed citizen involvement in educational decision making.

The MASS/PACTS project found evidence of collaboration throughout the state, with the local school building the prime locus of activity. The symbolic and practical importance of using the single school as the basic unit of participation for parents, students, and other community members is obvious. Legislative recommendations and written materials developed in the MASS/PACTS project should give impetus to the growth of school councils and other vehicles for school/community collaboration.

We are now working on a project called "Citizen-Action-Research," funded by the Hazen Foundation of New Haven, Connecticut. Citizen-Action-Research is a process designed to increase positive citizen participation through community learning. Fact-finding, when it is done by the people who themselves must act, can be a powerful form of citizen action, a new style of community politics. In early 1976 we will have a field-tested set of materials for citizens and community organizations--including government and school officials--who wish to use action research.

In a citizen-action-research program citizens become involved in defining the issues, getting the facts, determining what needs to be done, and doing it. They draw on local resources wherever possible to help accomplish their goals. The politics of alienation, frustration, and confrontation are replaced by the politics of planning together and acting together.

We are not naive enough to think that adversarial situations and conflicts will never come up, even in this process. But neither can we ignore the evidence that in the absence of positive steps by public officials and community groups, the result is at best distrust, apathy or nonsupport, and at worst, open hostility. Citizen-action-research offers one good way to build a climate, structure, and set of programs for cooperative problem solving by public officials and lay people.

Our first action-research publication was Parker Palmer's Action-Research: A New Style of Politics in Education, which outlined eight techniques for citizen fact-finding. One of the most important of these is participant-observation, the topic of this report. By developing skills in participant observation, parents and citizen groups can monitor situations that concern them, and learn to compile and report facts, not

simply impressions, about those situations. Classroom observations, for instance, can provide an invaluable source of data for parent groups. Those facts can be the basis for important recommendations for change and support for the continuation of positive programs.

A participant/observer is an investigator gathering evidence. Like Columbo and Woodward and Bernstein, he amasses data about a particular problem by watching, searching for clues, following leads, interviewing key informants, and making interpretations from the evidence to reconstruct events. The participant/observer is concerned with facts--impressions are not useful unless verified by investigation. Observations are carefully recorded; prejudgment is scorned; judgments flow from the evidence. The goal for both types of investigators is not absolute truth but plausibility; what seems to be true. Observations and reports are pieced together carefully and woven into a persuasive case.

PART A

THE PURPOSE OF PARTICIPANT/ OBSERVATION

P/O is most useful as a tool for gathering evidence about processes, circumstances, or other observable conditions. P/O helps answer questions like:

How are things happening?

What things are happening that we don't usually measure?

Under what conditions are they happening?

Why are they happening?

The quality of education, for example, can be influenced by <u>how</u> people are teaching, the infamous hidden curriculum,[1] or the physical conditions of the school building, neighborhood, and home. Unless data are gathered on these factors and others--as well as on traditional items such as test scores, curricular options, and student/parent attitudes, the picture of a school program may be incomplete.

Citizen groups doing action-research will often need information about other process or "how" concerns. Student interaction, discipline procedures,

[1]The hidden curriculum has come to mean the way in which schools affect students. Many observers have concluded that schools operate to train kids to be compliant, passive, and dull rather than independent, active, or curious.

school "climate,"[2] teacher rigidity/flexibility, grading practices, or student advisement are several which come to mind. By watching and probing, concerned citizens can obtain valuable information about crucial things that often go unrecorded.

One rather timely example is the relationship between what schools teach and how they teach. For example, "learning skills of scientific inquiry" and "the use of the scientific method" are the basic goals of almost every science program. In a science class where students complain that they are forced to memorize long lists, rarely use labs, or have little time for discussion and analysis, those fundamental objectives are being ignored. Students may not be thinking scientifically or inquiring, thus missing the whole point. The traditional way to gather evidence about such a situation is to determine problem solving skills by seeing if kids can answer a predetermined set of questions correctly. Another way that more effectively measures the process of learning and teaching is to observe classes to find out whether teachers are encouraging "scientific" thinking and active learning. We would suggest that action-researchers use both approaches and combine results in order to fully understand the science program.

Examples might come from any area. Whether or not a school promotes self-discipline, original thinking, positive attitudes, and social interaction will be readily apparent to the participant/observer. Discussions with school authorities and students will add to the investigator's picture. Whenever you investigate school problems, then you should experience the school. What is a school day like? What's the nature of the action in the classroom? The hallways? Schoolyard? Offices? Student hang-outs? How does this school educate?

Similar questions could be asked about any institution. Citizens dealing with health problems might ask about a health center of a hospital. Consumers might ask about business institutions. Workers might ask about conditions of employment. Asking questions about processes and conditions will tell you a lot about <u>what</u> is happening, <u>how</u> it's happening, and perhaps most important, <u>why</u> it's happening.

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[2]School "climate" refers to the prevailing atmosphere--is the school "open" or "closed?" Does it promote learning and have a sense of purpose? Rigid or flexible? What is the "personality" of the school?

PART B

A THREE STEP STRATEGY FOR CITIZEN GROUPS

Any situation under investigation is likely to be part of a larger institution or system--a unit made up of mutually dependent, interconnected parts. Evidence about the situation is likely to be found throughout the system in which it is embedded. Changes in the situation are likely to cause changes in other parts of the system and vice versa. Situations, in short, do not exist in vacuums. Build that reality into an effective fact-finding strategy, one that scales problems to size.

STEP 1.
Get a flavor of as much of the system as possible.

STEP 2.
Identify those problems or parts of the system that influence the situation under investigation.

STEP 3.
Select the problems or parts which seem most important and might provide vital evidence.

Say that you are generally concerned about what you see as low quality education in a local school. In Step 1, to "get the flavor" of the entire situation, you might make extensive school visits. Go through a school day as a student does. Pass through various time blocks and spaces. Experience the halls, yards, gym, lavatories, offices. Investigate what happens before and after school, and at lunch.

Wind up Step 2 by identifying which problems occur in which parts of the system. For instance, discipline procedures may be generated in the prinicpal's office, grading practices in the classroom, and student advisement in the guidance office.

In Step 3 the investigator or investigators select problems of greatest concern in those parts of the system likely to yield fruitful evidence. This strategy allows them to take a large, complex problem and reduce it to manageable proportions so that the investigating team is clear about its purposes and confident of success.

In order to implement the three step strategy, you'll need to know exactly what types of data might be useful and how to get them.

PART C

P/O DATA: WHAT IT IS AND HOW TO GET IT

Participant observers record facts and put them together into a meaningful picture.

As you observe a situation, don't consciously attempt to "memorize" it. Simply be aware. To the greatest extent possible, block out your emotions and logic. Just try to think of yourself as the world's greatest sensing device--as a computer in touch with everything around you. Be observant, but do not "try to remember." Memory is an unconscious function, so "trying to remember" not only is fruitless, it also makes you less sensitive to what's around you. When you're thinking about trying to remember, you can't be absorbing the situation under observation.

After an observation, sit down in a quiet place and make notes about what happened. You'll be surprised at how accurately you'll be able to record the facts.

Five types of data, or facts, are often important to the observer:

1. Descriptive Data About Settings--observations about the physical or institutional setting surrounding the situation.

The setting may include community factors, but always includes a description of the "actors," their "costumes and props" and the "stage" on which they appear. Record only what you see and know--this is a descriptive step. The recording can be put together later in order to interpret what is or is not important. For instance, after observing a group of teachers for several mornings, one observer noted that

> Costumes are very 'normal' and 'status quo' oriented in the group...the most 'radical' form of dress was slacks and a sport shirt, the dressiest a pin-striped suit...Bright plaid or striped clothing invariably drew comments...Nearly 75% wore ties...Nobody had long hair.[3]

The data on settings in this case contained major pieces of evidence which, when combined with other bits of evidence, eventually led the researcher to describe a conservative, male-oriented group; their perceptions of their worlds and their jobs; and how their perceptions related to their effectiveness as school administrators.

Useful information about settings must be based on <u>fact</u>, not impression. The following demonstrates the difference between facts that will stand public scrutiny and build a powerful case, and impressions without evidence.

FACTS:
THE SUPERMARKET FLOOR WAS LITTERED WITH MANY CIGARETTE BUTTS: THE MEAT MAN'S UNIFORM

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[3]Bill Burges, "Coffee with the Guys," unpublished, Boston University School of Education, 1974.

WAS SOILED AND HIS HANDS WERE DIRTY. ON THREE DAYS OUT OF THE FOUR WE VISITED, THE DAIRY CASE WAS NOT WELL-REFRIGERATED (WE MEASURED IT AT 55 DEGREES).

IMPRESSIONS:
THE SUPERMARKET IS DIRTY AND UNFIT FOR FOOD DISTRIBUTION.

2. Accurate Descriptions of Actions and Behaviors.

Record (exactly) whatever is done that relates to the situation you are investigating. Once again be aware of the difference between fact and impression.

FACT:
JIMMY SCREAMED, "I HATE YOU" AND ATTEMPTED TO ATTACK THE TEACHER. THREE STUDENTS RESTRAINED HIM, BUT MOST CHEERED OR LAUGHED.

IMPRESSION:
THERE WERE SEVERAL UNRULY STUDENTS IN THE ROOM, ESPECIALLY ONE BOY.

FACT:
MISS SMITH PRACTICALLY SNARLED AT JANE, BUT I COULDN'T MAKE OUT EXACTLY WHAT SHE SAID.

IMPRESSION:
THE TEACHER WAS IN A BAD MOOD.

3. Word for Word Statements.

Record the key words in a train of thought or discussion exactly as they are stated. Focus in, or "lock onto," the discussion's general flow as well as specifics. You need to pick out exactly what is said and by whom.

As much as possible, block out your feelings about what is happening. Reason and emotion only get in the way at this point. You can interpret the data later.

Aim for direct quotes as much as possible, since they provide the best material for later analysis. The best way to do this is to listen and not take notes, then isolate yourself immediately afterward and reconstruct what was said and done. Most people are amazed by how well they can do this.

4. Traces and Wear Spots

Some evidence is not readily noticeable. Participant/observers sometimes call the measurement of such data "unobtrusive." The two most frequently encountered types of unobtrusive measures are "trace effects" and "wear spots."

"Traces" are indicators of past behavior, accumulations or deposits of evidence providing clues to some past activity. Large numbers of cigarette butts spread throughout a room may indicate frequent use and/or infrequent cleaning. Offensive graffiti aimed at particular teachers may indicate low student morale. Marked desk tops may lead you to believe that a teacher lacks class control. Then again, these traces may have entirely different meanings. Record them without interpretation at first, and piece them together later.

"Wear spots" are measures of attrition or use related to par-

ticular activities. A public library that is successful, for instance, is likely to have well worn books. Worn rugs and equipment might indicate the popularity of various parts of a school resource center.

Measuring "wear spots" and "trace" effects are particularly useful for studying problems...

> in which the 'intrusions' of the researcher makes the problem impossible to study. For example, suppose we want to discover the extent of drinking in a town which has officially 'gone dry.' Clearly we are not likely to get much from door-to-door interviews. People will be reluctant to say anything except that they follow the law. In the face of such difficulty one researcher invented an imaginative unobtrusive measure. He went up and down alleys counting the number of discarded liquor bottles. Messy, but it worked.[4]

5. Documents

Written materials are particularly relevant for getting information about background, solutions, regulations, and policies. Some of the most useful documents include newspapers, policy manuals, census data, student handbooks, local-state-federal regulations on all subjects, laws, budgets, and relevant books or articles. Such literature helps investigators find out about new ideas, about what ought to be happening, and about how to make it happen. Relevant written materials can yield information of value to almost any conceivable citizen-action-research project.

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As you gather data, observe natural and typical settings wherever possible. In general you will be trying to discover things that are "par for the course." The observers who concentrate on deviant cases leave themselves open to charges of manipulation and inaccuracy. Aim to observe a variety of typical circumstances in which the usual processes and conditions come into play. Observing a school during final exam week doesn't produce much useful information about what usually happens there.

While observing it is important to be as sensitive and non-disruptive as possible, so that situations reflect reality. Try not to take written notes--it may affect those being observed and definitely detracts from your ability to observe. People are pleasantly surprised at their abilities to memorize key phrases, interchanges, action, etc., and record them immediately after the observations. If brief notes are necessary, so be it, but with a little practice (exercises at close of this paper) note-taking is likely to prove practically unnecessary.

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[4] Parker Palmer and Elden Jacobsen, Action Research: A New Style of Politics in Education, an IRE Report, Boston, Institute for Responsive Education, 1974, pp. 26-27.

PART D

A SPECIAL CASE: RELIABLE WITNESSES AND INFORMANTS

Key people can provide important evidence that is otherwise unobtainable. Certainly, some people have special skills and knowledge that has bearing on particular situations. Far more important here, however, are "insiders," people who have access to information that only a few people know about.

The best sources of information are often those who have either the broadest access to the total situation or access to key areas. A reliable informant in the first case may be a school custodian who sees and understands the students, teachers, administrators and others in a school. Such an informant can be helpful in getting a broad view.

Secretaries, custodians, bookkeepers, or committee vice-presidents are examples of people who have access to key areas and can be helpful in developing strategies for investigation. "Experts" or decision-makers are not always useful informants--often they have a narrow and biased viewpoint. Look for the "switchboard"--someone who handles all the messages, but has no axe to grind.

The value of these informants is considerably increased if they are willing to give you "hard facts." What happened at the secret meeting, executive session, or in the back room? Why did someone behave in a particular way? What are the behind-the-scene facts of a matter?

Informants may be reluctant to tell too much, especially at first. You will need to convince them of your sincerity and integrity, question them carefully, and be patient. The use of informants can be frustrating and painstakingly slow, but has exciting potential.

Journalists understand data gathering very well. In All the President's Men, Watergate investigators Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward provided many vivid examples of working with informants. The following sequence is among the most instructive:

> The Bookkeeper was looking at Bernstein's coffee cup again, having second thoughts. 'There are too many people watching me,' she said. 'They know I'm privy and they watch me like a hawk.' She was convinced her phones were tapped.
> How much money was paid out?
> 'A lot.'
> More than half a million?
> 'You've had it in print.'
> Finally it clicked. Sometimes he could be incredibly slow, Bernstein thought to himself. It was the slush fund of cash kept in Stans' safe.
> 'I never knew it was a 'security fund' or whatever they called it,' she said, 'until after June 17. I just thought it was an all-purpose political fund that you didn't talk about--like to take fat cats to dinner, but all strictly legal.'
> $350,000 in dinners? How

was it paid out?
'Not in one chunk. I know what happened to it, I added up the figures.' There had been a single sheet of paper on which the account was kept; it had been destroyed, the only record.
'It was a lined sheet with names on about half the sheet, about fifteen names with the amount distributed to each person next to the name. I saw it more than once. The amounts kept getting bigger.'
She had updated the sheet each time a disbursement was made. Sloan knew the whole story too. He had handed out the money.
Bernstein asked about the names again. He was confused because there were about 15 names on the sheet, yet she thought only six were involved. Which six?
'Go down the GAO report; I think they've all been before the grand jury. They're easy to isolate; a couple have been names in the press but not necessarily in connection with this.'[5]

Unfortunately the use of witnesses is not always as exciting as it was during the Watergate investigation. Neither is it always so difficult.

While citizens attempting to uncover scandal or perform a watchdog role will find themselves in dramatic circumstances, others may find themselves routinely following up leads or depth-interviewing people who are "in the know." Regardless of the situation, the use of reliable witnesses requires perseverance, imagination, sensitivity to hints and clues and willingness to ask tough questions. It is among the most productive and efficient of research techniques.

[5] Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, All the President's Men, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1974, pp. 67-68.

PART E

USING THE DATA

An observer team should meet frequently during the fact-finding process in order to draw inferences, raise new questions, and adjust the scope, focus, and schedule of observations accordingly. The data will constantly confirm or suggest questions for exploration and vantage points for getting more data. The process is inductive. It moves from recording specific facts to compiling series of facts, to interpreting the facts.

As the observation schedule comes to a close, the following questions are appropriate:

1. Does the evidence support/reject particular answers to research questions?
2. What new questions does the evidence raise? Should we attempt to answer them? Should we pursue other leads and chase down other clues?
3. How does the data developed through P/O tie into other relevant information? (A multi-method approach is likely to help answer difficult questions and present a persuasive report in which facts, figures, descriptive analysis, and other information are built into a compelling case and set of proposals.)

PART F

WHO CAN DO P/O?

Almost anyone can do P/O. It takes sensitivity, concentration and an open mind. If you can "tune in" on situations and be aware of what's going on, then you can do P/O. The objective is simply to observe and record, free of prejudice, situations exactly as they happened. You are extracting the facts from a situation. The interpretation takes place afterward.

In dividing the observations, consider the following:

1. People should not be placed as observers in situations where they will encounter pet peeves.
2. People who are unafraid to enter into new situations, but who also "blend into the woodwork" make good participant observers.
3. Good listeners make good observers, as do people with a wide range of interests.
4. People who are relatively unfamiliar or value-free with respect to situations make good participant/observers because they don't feel compelled to interpret. Pick people with the least potential for pre-judging situations and the most potential to "go in clean" whenever you can.
5. Curious, inquisitive people are good candidates for P/O.

6. "Informants" may be prejudiced and may slant the information they give you, so probe carefully and verify information by checking it against the testimony of other witnesses.

PART G

SELF-TRAINING EXERCISES

(1) Mini-observations

Each observer makes a fifteen minute visit to any situation (e.g. laundromats, restaurants) and immediately afterward records all data observed. Following that, the group comes together and each person reports on what was seen. (You might wish to do this in small groups.)

This exercise will enable you to become more aware of the wide variety of things that are "observable." What is significant about the setting, the costumes, the overall situation?

(2) Conversations

Attempt to memorize the key parts of a conversation. Don't try to take on more than a half hour or so the first time. Record the data immediately. Piece it together. What does it say?

This exercise is a good way to learn to "tune in" to a conversation. You'll find that you can remember more than you thought you could.

(3) Memory Tests

Try to "tune in" on ten minute segments of other people's conversation. For instance, try to listen carefully to ten minutes of a school committee or city council meeting. Who said what to whom and in what sequence? Once again, record the data immediately after leaving the situation.

(4) Community Observations

Visit a community setting in a team of three or four. Observe the street scenes and the actors. What are the major institutions? What are the people like? Is there much interaction? What socio-economic characteristics stand out?

Once you've done the observation, meet as a team and put together a "community analysis" based on the one observation. Present it to the other teams and vice versa. The exercise will promote your ability to observe community influences.

(5) Mock Informant Interviews

Practice the depth interviews needed to get information from informants if you need to use that technique. Have one person conduct the mock interview while another plays the role of informant. Introductory questions should be written in advance and reviewed after the simulated interview. You might ask each other to describe your neighborhoods, a committee you serve on, or interesting experiences.

If possible, interview someone about a subject on which s/he has more information than s/he wants to reveal. Anyone who plans to do depth interviewing of informants needs practice. The more reluctant you anticipate the informants will be, the more important it is to work on this exercise.

(6) Your School

Ask the principal to arrange for a group of three or four of you to visit the school in your neighborhood. Ask to tour the building, sit in on classes, get to the cafeteria, and talk to a couple of teachers. At the end of the day, sit down as a group and list the things that made an impression on you, and develop another list of areas for further inquiry. Call back and ask the principal to let you look into those situations for further inquiry. This is more than an exercise, it is the beginning of a citizen study of the school.

(7) Trace Effects and Wear Spots

If you buy a coke from a vendor and notice that when you throw the flip top away that the rubbish barrel is full, you might think that the vendor is doing a brisk business. A display windowpane with nose and finger smudges is likely to indicate that little people are stopping at the window to look. Wine bottles in the school men's room obviously mean something, although we may not know exactly what.

These are trace effects. The dirty or worn rugs in front of the display window is a wear spot. For an entire week, note the traces and wear spots you see, as you go through your daily routine. List them each night when you get home. This will sensitize you to be aware of this valuable, often overlooked form of evidence.

(8) Group Study

Attend three or four meetings of the same group, making P/O notes immediately after each. After the sequence of meetings, list each "piece of evidence"

on a separate card and then put them together. What story does the evidence tell? What is the group about? How do they see themselves? Is their real business the same as their "stated" purpose? Can you sum up the meetings in one or two sentences? Discuss your findings with a friend. If you plan to observe groups, this is an important training exercise, well worth the effort.

PART H

SAMPLE OBSERVER'S REPORT

"Room 222 and Jim's Room"

by
Stephanie Bromley

Editor's Note:
Stephanie Bromley is a Social Psychology student in Boston University's College of Liberal Arts. In the brief report that follows, she compares a "traditional" and an "open" classroom. Stephanie had neither prior experience with open education nor training in participant observation when she made these observations. Yet she developed an insightful report by recording and compiling the facts which led her to the penetrating questions she raises in her "discussion" of the data.

Other observers may also be left with informed questions rather than hard answers after the facts are compiled, questions that can often form the framework for intelligent debate and proposals for action.

ROOM 222

Miss Smith's 5th grade class waits outside the school building until 8:15 when a bell rings and they are allowed to go in. The children go up to Room 222.

The room is modern, and even though the venetian blinds are pulled down to expose only two feet of window, it is bright. Above the teacher's desk is a placard with a List of Rules:

1. I will behave properly at all times, in class, at recess, etc.

2. I will not talk out or leave my seat without permission.

3. I will pay attention while the teacher is explaining.

The room is very neat. In the room there is an American flag, a large yellow "smile" face, a poster of the Declaration of Independence, two globes. A poster tells the class "We Communicate Through Language" and shows Charles Schultz characters communicating. Another poster shows famous explorers. One board has a winking cat and big letters, "Purr-fect," under which are displayed "purr-fect" spelling tests and papers of the students. Another display is of "Our Letters," neatly arranged short letters by the kids to other kids in the class. Paper cut-outs of the solar system are stapled to a section of the ceiling. The desks are in rows, one behind the other, facing the teacher's desk. On one side of the room four desks form a small unit. Nobody sits at these desks. Supplies are neatly stacked in a cabinet near the door. Mis Smith wears a very mini-mini-skirt, dark stockings, and high-heeled sandals. Every boy except one has short hair. One girl wears overalls. No girls wear dresses or skirts.

Over the P.A. system Mr. O'Leary, the principal, has everybody stand to say the pledge of allegiance. The kids turn toward the flag, hands over

hearts and mumble along with Mr. O'Leary. They sit while Mr. O'Leary makes the announcements of the day to the staff, faculty and students.

Mr. O'Leary wishes everybody a good morning. There will be this meeting here, that meeting there. I want to thank Mrs. Cristin, Miss Cordobes, Mrs. Ing, etc. Everybody have a good vacation.

During announcements two kids come into class late. All together there are 16 kids present. Miss Smith remarks that there are a lot of kids absent today.

Mr. O'Leary talks for 20 minutes. The kids whisper, work in their notebooks, sharpen pencils. Several kids look at me periodically. I smile at them. Most of them smile back. There is no opportunity to introduce myself.

When Mr. O'Leary is through Miss Smith has George, Joan, and Antoinetta sit at desks near the blackboard. The other kids sit on the other side of the room and work on long division by themselves.

Joan, George, Antoinetta work on fractions with Miss Smith. She goes through proper and improper fractions, listing out fractions, denominators, numerators...Antoinetta is confused, even though Miss Smith tells her three times it is review. "You've been doing this for 3 days."

After 20 mintues of working out loud, they get a fraction sheet to try on their own, and Miss Smith frees herself to answer questions about long division. One by one the kids come up to her, hand her their papers. She corrects them, a big C or X through each problem. Neither the kids nor the teacher look at each other. They look at the paper.

Miss Smith bumps into Robert. When John asks her a questions she pushes his bangs off his forehead. These are the only times anyone touches anyone else while I am there.

Joan finishes her fractions and Miss Smith tells her to check some spelling tests. A tense moment occurs when Joan finds that John has given himself 100% on a list which has incorrect words. She tells this to Miss Smith. Miss Smith calls John across the room.

All eyes are on John. John says he must have left the other list home. "Get it in by Monday." End of incident.

Richard hands her his paper. She corrects it. "So I got a 94 on that paper? One wrong?"

"Yeah, you did good yesterday, too." says Miss Smith.

They work on arithmetic for an hour. Those who finish early work on their book reports, read, or work in their phonics books. Miss Smith wants to give a spelling test before ten o'clock and tells everybody to hurry up.

"You're so slow." she says to the ones still working.

Miss Smith talks to me for a minute while nobody has any questions for her. She asks

me why I am here. Everybody turns around to listen. I tell her I have been working at an alternative school and wanted to compare it with another school. I tell her the alternative school is very noisy. She says she doesn't like noise and wouldn't be able to work in a place like that.

JIM'S ROOM

Jim's kids drift into the classroom about 8:30 a.m. The room is arranged in sections. It is very messy. Between units of desks are large pieces of painted plasterboard. Overgrown plants lean toward the windoes. Papers, books, and supplies lie all over tables. The floor is littered. The gerbils' cage is filled with nibbled colored paper. A relief sculpture of play-dough spreads over several feet of one of the blackboards, with little cars, plastic flowers and odd bits of things stuck into the play-dough. Make-believe advertisements are stuck over another blackboard. Each of the kids has made one. They proclaim the benefits of "No-good Airlines" and Ickie Tooghpaste," etc.

There is a list of what everybody in the class (including Les) weighs on earth, on the moon, and on one other planet. Over one door is a student-made poster with fire-drill instructions. Self-portraits of all the kids are lined up high on a wall.

The writing assignment for the week is on another wall. The kids are to write a "Dear Abby" letter which can concern a real or imaginary problem. Another list has everybody's name and where the names derive from. Several hand-made multiplication tables are posted around the room. There are lots of books and comic books all over. A small weekly schedule is tacked to the side of one of the bookcases.

Jim and Thomas, the aide for the 4th, 5th, and 6th grade classes both wear bluejeans. Some boys have long hair. Stacey wears a skirt. Robbie wears matching shirt and pants. Eric and Scotty wear knit caps. Sam wears a very dirty holey sweatshirt. Laurie wears a brand new Boston University sweatshirt.

The boys play with rockets, cars, little Supermen and Spidermen. Some of the boys still have their coats and jackets on. They talk about sports. The girls form two groups. Laurie's group talks about gymnastics and how they hate boys. They discuss one of their projects, a play they are writing. Robin's group is smaller and quieter... they stay close to their desks by the window, talking quietly.

Jim calls a meeting. Slowly or quickly people move to the "meeting corner." Jim sits on a chair. Boys talk and poke each other. Boys and girls stay away from the opposite sex. But there is lots of touching. Girls wrap arms around each other and me. Boys lean on their pals. Throughout the meeting Eric makes small exploding sounds and plays with a little pink figure. Several times Jim says Eric's name,

quietly but firmly warning him to keep it down when the explosions get too loud.

Jim tells everybody, "Anybody who wants to spend lots of time writing this week can spend all the time they want on it."

Paul says, "A year?"

Jim ignores it.

All the kids move and wriggle and make comments throughout the meeting.

Two weeks from tomorrow the class is going to the Museum of Fine Arts to see the Frontier America exhibit.

Paul comments, "What do we want to go to the Museum of Fine Farts for?"

Everybody comments. Robbie (to no one in particular), "I hate the Museum of Fine Arts." Jim says they are lucky because Charlotte's mother works there and will show them the frontier exhibit. They will spend at least one hour there. "Does anyone want to spend more time there?" All the girls raise their hands.

Matt starts to raise his hand but realizes he is the only boy to do so and keeps his hand down. Jim explains that they can do whatever they want after they see the frontier show. After a while all the boys raise their hands, too, except for Robbie. Paul suggests that he will spend all his free time outside with the pretzel man. Everybody comments.

I go to another room with Karen's group for shop. At 9 the kids who eat breakfast at the school race downstairs. That leaves Robbie, me, Karen, and Laurie's group of 5 girls. I ask who eats breakfast here and who doesn't. Anybody who doesn't eat breakfast at home eats it here 'cause they only have junky cereal, all sugary, ecch!' Much discussion about junky cereals. With Karen we clean out a cabinet filled with cardboard, old wood, manuscripts and assorted debris.

Karen has a plan to make a miniature greenhouse, the size of an egg carton. But first we have to make a blueprint. They need a ruler.

The girls demand that Robbie find one. He tries but he can't. Laurie climbs a tall bookcase and finds a box of them at the top. Then a crayon is needed. Marion says, "Robert, get out of here and get a crayon!" Robbie goes and looks for one in another room, comes back with a crayon and smiles, "Is there anything else I can volunteer for?"

Sam comes in and goes up to Karen. Ever so politely he explains that he was absent the day the kids signed up to be in shop. Would it be all right for him to join them?

Karen welcomes him. One girl says grudgingly that they have already started. Karen and Sam ignore the remark. They slowly make a blueprint for the greenhouse. Sam does most of the figuring and measuring.

The girls seem restless. They move more. They lean on their elbows on the table, and they lean on each other. They play with bits of plastic, the

rulers, the plexi-glass. Eric wanders in from breakfast.

Karen tries to get Eric and Robbie to figure out some fractions. They do not do so well. Sam quietly and efficiently does the math. Paul comes in and goes out twice and then comes in for good. Matt comes in.

Paul and Eric start to play with some wood bits in a barrel in the corner of the room.

Karen says, "Matt, heat up the strip heater."

Now is the time to build the greehnouse. Everybody gathers around the heater. Karen moans that her knife was stolen at another school, and she is not sure the saber saw will cut plexi-glass. The kids want to know which school. "Never mind." The saw will not cut the plastic. It shatters.

The heater is turned off. No greenhouse is built.

Discussion

I am thoroughly confounded. I spent 1 1/2 hours in Miss Smith's class, and I've spent hours and days in Jim's class. So I should know something. But mostly I have questions.

It is obvious to me that the fifth graders in Miss Smith's room know how to answer much more difficult math problems than many of the kids at the alternative school. Is that important? Are the kids in the alternative school maybe retaining but not performing? Will they make up for their lack of math now with strides made later?

The kids at Barrington know exactly what is expected of them. They know the rules. They know that Miss Smith does not like noise and they whisper. Is that good or bad?

Is it good that Paul wanders in and out of a classroom and "talks back" to Jim? Or is it bad? Does it make any difference?

After spending so much time in Jim's room I'd forgotten a class full of kids could be quiet. It was sort of spooky, the quiet at Barrington. But is it good to make as much noise as you like? Is there a kid at the alternative school who hates noise and can't work in such a boisterous atmosphere? Are there many, perhaps?

During the first day I spent in Jim's class several kids came up to me and asked who I was and what I was up to. Another asked me to help her with some work. Nobody asked me who I was at Barrington.

The hour and a half I was at Barrington was spent in ritual, (the announcements, pledge of allegiance, filling out the lunch sheet), and lessons. The only social interaction between students was in brief whispers to each other.

There were incidents of antisocializing--the child who "told" on Maria for using a pencil, Joan's exposing John.

At Collville Alternative School girls scream and yell and complain to Jim about the boys mistreating them. But small infractions are dealt with face-on, student to student. And kids work and play together. In fact, Laurie's group does "everything" together. Is that good or bad? Does it make any difference?

Something in me says that kids have to be taught the "basics," and they seemed to be getting them at Barrington more than at the alternative school. But something else says kids must be free to be individuals, certainly freer than in Miss Smith's quiet little regimented group. Schools must teach, but must they teach at the expense of the individual?

PART I

CHECK LIST

Look back to the Sample Report, do one of the self training exercises, or read one of the books in the Resource Directory. Did the observer:

1. Record facts rather than experiences?
2. Explain the background to the situation being observed?
3. Describe "costumes, props, and the stage?"
4. Use accurate, detailed descriptions of actions and behaviors?
5. Report word-for-word statements where appropriate?
6. Work effectively with reliable witnesses and informants?
7. Report on any important trace effects or wear spots?
8. Use documents to add to her observations?
9. Seem to observe natural and typical instances?
10. Become involved in a situation to the extent that it was disruptive or unnatural?
11. Have pre-formed opinions or "axes to grind?"
12. Make interpretations that flow directly from the data?

P/O FOR WHAT?

Bill Burges

If I wanted to measure teaching quality at a school, I'd rather spend a day observing teachers than looking over test scores or credentials.

If I wanted to see a school day through the eyes of a student I'd spend a couple of days in a student's routine. Then I'd interview other students to make sure my experience was typical.

If I were interested in student/teacher conflict, I'd undoubtedly start out by looking for conflict--in the halls, in the classrooms, in the lavatories, and elsewhere. By observing carefully I'd be able to find some answers and probably generate new questions about any of these topics.

If I wanted to know "what a community was like" I'd spend time on the street, in the stores, and with the people.

In short, any time we want to know how things are happening, why, under what conditions and what's going on that is not usually measured, we turn to participant observation. We seldom use it alone. Few research techniques work well in isolation, so background reading, surveys, and other fact-finding approaches help shed light on other pieces of particular problems.

By reading, for instance, we can frame a problem, get a perspective on it, and help explain things that we see but may not understand. Surveys can be used to discover people's attitudes, opinions, socio-economic characteristics, or past behaviors.

The point of this paper, however, is that participant observation has much to offer the citizen concerned with schools. And it is often ignored as a tool for gathering evidence. Groups often turn to surveys, experts, or readings without considering the obvious:

WHAT THEY CAN SEE MAY WELL BE WHAT THEY ARE GETTING.

Whether you are a group of parents concerned about the atmosphere in your child's school, a high school student who wants to publish a course evaluation, or any other group interested in education, participant observation can be a powerful fact-finding tool.

Besides, it's fun.

RESOURCE DIRECTORY

BOOKS

1. Becker, Howard and Geer, Blanche, Boys in White: Student Culture in Medical School. William C. Brown, Co., 1961.

2. Becker, Howard and Geer, Blanche, Making the Grade: The Academic Side of College Life. John Wiley & Sons, 1968.

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6. Kerlinger, Frederick N., Foundations of Behavioral Research: Educational, Psychological, & Sociological Inquiry. 2nd edition, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1973.

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9. Palmer, Parker and Jacobsen, Elden, Action Research: A New Style of Politics in Education. IRE, 1974.

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